

Diego E. Machuca*

Pyrrhonian Argumentation: Therapy, Dialectic, and Inquiry

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Abstract: The Pyrrhonist's argumentative practice is characterized by at least four features. First, he makes a *therapeutic* use of arguments: he employs arguments that differ in their persuasiveness in order to cure his dogmatic patients of the distinct degrees of conceit and rashness that afflict them. Secondly, his arguments are for the most part *dialectical*: when offering an argument to oppose it to another argument advanced by a given dogmatist, he accepts *in propria persona* neither the truth of its premises and conclusion nor the validity of its logical form. Thirdly, he avails himself of arguments in his own *open-minded inquiry into the truth* about a wide range of topics. Fourthly, Pyrrhonian argumentation is *oppositional* inasmuch as it typically works by producing oppositions among arguments that appear to the Pyrrhonist to be equipollent. In this article, I focus on the first three features with the aim of both shedding some light on them and determining whether they are in tension or coherently relate to each other.

Keywords: Pyrrhonism, argumentation, therapy, dialectic, inquiry

Introduction

The Pyrrhonist's philosophical practice, as depicted in Sextus Empiricus's extant corpus, is characterized by the use of a wide variety of arguments. The Pyrrhonian argumentative arsenal includes intricate and sophisticated arguments that to this day pose serious epistemological challenges, as well as arguments that are deemed to be fairly weak or patently sophisticated. The arguments of which the Pyrrhonist avails himself are either put forward by his dogmatic rivals or constructed by himself.¹ Several features characterize his argumentative practice. First, he makes

¹ Following Sextus, I will use 'Pyrrhonist' and 'skeptical' interchangeably, and I will employ 'dogmatist' to refer to anyone who makes assertions about how things really are on the basis of what he regards as objective evidence and sound arguments.

*Corresponding author: **Diego E. Machuca**, Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, E-mail: diegomachuca@conicet.gov.ar
<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9978-7779>

a *therapeutic* use of arguments: he employs arguments that differ in their persuasiveness in order to cure his dogmatic patients of the distinct degrees of conceit and rashness that afflict them. Secondly, his arguments are for the most part *dialectical*: when offering an argument to oppose it to another argument advanced by a given dogmatist, he accepts *in propria persona* neither the truth of its premises and conclusion nor the validity of its logical form. Thirdly, and contrary to what the previous two features might suggest, the Pyrrhonist avails himself of arguments in his own *open-minded inquiry into the truth* about a wide range of topics, if any such truth there is. For his suspension of judgment precludes him from asserting that argumentation has no epistemic value, i.e., no value in reaching the epistemic goals of attaining truth and avoiding error. There is a fourth feature that was alluded to above: Pyrrhonian argumentation is *oppositional* inasmuch as it typically works by setting up oppositions among arguments that appear to the Pyrrhonist to be equipollent, that is, equally persuasive from an epistemic point of view. Although this fourth feature will be present in the background, in this article I will focus on the first three with the aim of both shedding some light on them and determining whether they are in tension or coherently relate to each other.

Before providing an outline of the article, I would like to explain in more detail what I understand by a dialectical argument. It is an argument (1) that is employed in debate, be it oral or written and be it against a real (alive or dead) or imaginary opponent, (2) whose logical form is recognized as valid by the opponent in question, and (3) whose proponent is not doxastically committed to its soundness. A proponent of a dialectical argument can make use of (i) premises that he himself has come up with, or (ii) premises that are implicitly or explicitly endorsed by the rival with whom he is at present engaging inasmuch as they are borrowed from his rival's own doctrine or follow from it, or (iii) premises that are taken from the doctrines of other rivals. A dialectical argument whose premises are of type (ii) is an *ad hominem* argument, which is a *reductio* argument inasmuch as its proponent intends to show to his rival that the latter's own doctrine leads to a conclusion that is absurd from the viewpoint of that very doctrine. It is of course possible for someone to construct an argument only part of whose premises are endorsed by the opponent with whom he is engaging, whereas the rest of its premises either are premises he himself has come up with or are premises taken from the doctrine of some other opponent. Such an argument is partially *ad hominem*. Thus, I take it that in a dialectical argument there must be something that one's opponent endorses, but this need not be (some of) its premises; it can be only the rules of inference used in it. The proponent of a dialectical argument that is not *ad hominem* still expects that his rival will find the premises somewhat persuasive or plausible or credible, but of course that may not occur.

The present article's structure is as follows. I will begin by analyzing the final chapter of Sextus's *Pyrrhonian Outlines* (*Pyrrōneioi Hypotypōseis*, henceforth *PH*), which presents the skeptic's therapeutic use of arguments and its philanthropic motivation. In so doing, I will look at the connection between such a use and the dialectical character of the skeptic's argumentation. Then, I will briefly refer to Sextus's description of the skeptic as engaged in an ongoing inquiry into truth, and I will consider whether such a description is compatible with the therapeutic and dialectical uses of arguments. The concluding remarks will summarize the ways in which those three aspects of the skeptic's argumentative practice are compatible or incompatible.

Argumentative Therapy

Under the title “Why does the skeptic sometimes deliberately propound arguments feeble in their persuasiveness (ἀμυδροῦς ταῖς πιθανότησιν)?” the final chapter of *PH* offers a peculiar explanation of (part of) the skeptic's argumentative practice:

The skeptic, because he is philanthropic, wishes to cure by argument (ἰᾶσθαι λόγῳ), as far as he can (κατὰ δύναμιν), the conceit and rashness of the dogmatists. Hence, just as the doctors of the bodily affections possess remedies different in power, and apply severe ones to those who are severely affected and milder ones to those who are mildly affected, so too does the skeptic propound arguments that differ in strength (διαφόρους ... κατὰ ἰσχύν). He employs weighty (ἐμβριθέσι) arguments, capable of vigorously healing the affection of conceit of the dogmatists, in the case of those who are afflicted by a severe rashness, but milder (κουφοτέροις) ones in the case of those whose affection of conceit is superficial and easy to cure, and who are capable of being healed by a milder persuasiveness. This is why the person who is motivated by skepticism does not hesitate to sometimes propound arguments that appear weighty in their persuasiveness and sometimes, too, arguments that appear weaker (ὅτε μὲν ἐμβριθεῖς ταῖς πιθανότησιν, ὅτε δὲ καὶ ἀμυδροτέρους φαινομένους ... λόγους). He does this on purpose, since often the latter are sufficient for him to achieve his aim. (*PH* III 280–1)²

The first thing to note is that this passage, which is the only one in Sextus's extant works that refers to the Pyrrhonist's therapeutic use of arguments and its philanthropic motivation, is crucial in that it explains why the Pyrrhonist intends to persuade the dogmatists. For he may engage in philosophical debate and employ a wide range of arguments as one way of keeping on with his own

² The translations of the passages from Sextus's works are my own, but I have consulted Annas and Barnes (2000), Bett (2005), Bury (1933; 1935), Mates (1996), and Pellegrin (1997).

inquiry into truth (on which more in the penultimate section), but his intention to persuade those with whom he discusses requires another explanation, namely, that the dogmatists are regarded as patients who need to be cured of the intellectual diseases of conceit and rashness.³

Secondly, it might be thought that Sextus is saying that some of the arguments he employs in his therapy are objectively weighty in their persuasiveness, whereas others are objectively weak, feeble, or mild. Moreover, it might be thought that Sextus is distinguishing between objectively sound and unsound arguments, and explaining why the skeptic intentionally makes use of one or the other type of argument. In fact, several interpreters have maintained that Sextus recognizes that the skeptic sometimes deliberately or knowingly employs arguments he regards as sophistical, mistaken, fallacious, invalid, or logically weak, and that this is the reason why he claims that such arguments are of mild persuasiveness.⁴ By contrast, Jonathan Barnes has claimed that the skeptic makes use of arguments he regards as good (Barnes 1988, 76–7; 2000, xxviii–xxix). In Barnes’s view, at *PH* III 280–1 Sextus is not saying that the only thing that matters to the skeptic is the therapeutic power of arguments, and hence that he may use arguments he knows to be faulty provided that they succeed in curing his dogmatic patients. The skeptic looks for arguments that start with true or plausible premises and that use valid or reasonable forms of inference, because

When I prove something to you – when I play the part of intellectual therapist – I do not relax my standards of proof in the interest of effective therapy. On the contrary, the therapy depends on the fact that the arguments are good arguments; and it places a further constraint on them: they must not only be good but also appear to you to be good. (Barnes 2000, xxix)⁵

I think that both versions of the interpretation according to which the Pyrrhonist holds views about the objective features of his therapeutic arguments are mistaken. The reason is not only that, from what we learn from the rest of Sextus’s corpus, it is plain that the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment about whether his arguments are sound (see e.g. *PH* I 35), but also that nothing said at *PH* III 280–1 suggests either that he deliberately or knowingly employs fallacious

³ Some of the remarks made in this paragraph and those that follow develop ideas laid out in Machuca (2009).

⁴ See Brochard (2002 [1887], 335, 340), Annas (1998, 201 n. 14), Bailey (2002, 138–9), Thorsrud (2003, 235 n. 9), O’Keefe (2006, 388, 402), and Perin (2010, 118). Cf. Mates (1996, 314).

⁵ Barnes (1988; 2000) rejects an interpretation he previously defended in his co-authored book on the Ten Modes of Aenesidemus, where he claimed that the Pyrrhonist is not concerned with the soundness of his arguments, but rather with their efficacy (Annas and Barnes 1985, 50).

arguments or that he takes his arguments to make use of true or plausible premises and of valid or reasonable forms of inference. The only attribute of arguments referred to in the passage is their therapeutic efficacy, the effects they have on those who suffer from different degrees of conceit and rashness. Note also the use of φαινόμενους: Sextus does not say that some arguments *are* weighty and others *are* weak in their persuasiveness, but only that they *appear* to be so. Moreover, nowhere at *PH* III 280–1 does he speak of how arguments *are*. But even if he did, we know from other passages that he refrains from affirming that any of the things said in *PH* is just as he says it is, but merely reports how they appear to him at the moment (*PH* I 4), and that, when he uses the verb εἶναι, it is to be understood in the sense of φαίνεσθαι (*PH* I 135, 198; *Adversus Dogmaticos* [*AD*] V [= *AM* XI] 18–20). Hence, the Pyrrhonist's argumentative treatment should be interpreted phenomenologically: some arguments *appear* strong and others *appear* weak to him as far as their ability to persuade his dogmatic patients is concerned. None of the adjectives employed to characterize the two types of therapeutic arguments (ἀμαυρός, ἀμυδρός, ἔμβριθής, κοῦφος) express objective epistemic and logical features of those arguments. Given the skeptical doctor's therapeutic aim and his inability to form a judgment about the objective soundness or unsoundness of the arguments he employs, their only value left for him in the context of the argumentative treatment is their curative effect on his patients.⁶

Thirdly, by restricting himself to phenomenologically distinguishing and describing his therapeutic arguments according to their effects, not only does the skeptic abide by his suspension of judgment, but he has all he needs to apply his argumentative treatment. If the skeptic's aim is to persuade certain persons by argument because their intellectual well-being seems to depend on their being thus persuaded, then what matters from a pragmatic point of view is the therapeutic effects of the arguments he employs, regardless of what he himself thinks of the epistemic and logical credentials of those arguments. What ultimately matters is how those being treated view the argumentative drugs the skeptic is supplying to them. It is perfectly possible that a therapeutic argument that is sound according to traditional epistemological and logical standards might be viewed as unsound by a given patient, who would thereby

⁶ It should be noted that, even if the skeptic deemed some arguments to be objectively unsound, his therapeutic procedure would make perfect sense. For, if his intention is to cure his patients of their disease of dogmatism, then in the context of the argumentative treatment his sole criterion for choosing certain arguments is their persuasive efficacy, and so he would make use of unsound arguments insofar as they had the desired therapeutic effect on his patients.

remain unpersuaded, and hence uncured. It is equally possible that another therapeutic argument, despite being unsound by those same standards, might be viewed as sound by the patient in question, who would thereby be persuaded and cured. We therefore see here how the skeptic's therapeutic use of arguments relates to his dialectical use of them. The former hinges on the latter: in order for his argumentative drugs to be efficacious, the skeptical therapist must take into account what his patients think of the premises, conclusions, and inference rules of the arguments he puts forward. Thus, the dialectical arguments the skeptic applies in his intellectual therapy are typically *ad hominem*. When administering the argumentative treatment to his patients, the skeptic typically makes use of premises that are already accepted by the patient he is treating because this might make it easier for the cure to occur. However, he may also avail himself of premises that he himself has come up with or that are endorsed by some other patient, but that are likely to strike the patient under treatment as being as epistemically persuasive as the premises of the argument advanced by the latter. If the interpretation defended here is correct, then the skeptic is able to apply such a personalized treatment despite the fact that he does not accept the premises, conclusions, and inference rules of his therapeutic arguments *in propria persona*. Someone might object that, if the skeptic's arguments do not consist of premises, conclusions, and inference rules to which he is doxastically committed, then they will not be able to persuade his dogmatic patients. In reply, it should be observed that whether someone is persuaded by a given argument does not necessarily depend on whether the person who advances the argument believes it is sound, plausible, or compelling. For example, if an academic is presented with an argument by a colleague, he may come to the conclusion that the argument is sound and hence may be persuaded by it even though he does not know what his colleague thinks of the argument, or even though he knows that his colleague finds the argument unsound, or even though he knows that his colleague suspends judgment about the argument's soundness.

Fourthly, at the beginning of the quoted passage Sextus tells us that the Pyrrhonist wishes to cure by argument his patients' rashness and conceit κατὰ δύναμιν, which is standardly rendered as "as far as he can" or related expressions.⁷ With that phrase, Sextus is expressing humility and caution, as any good Pyrrhonist would do: he does not affirm that his argumentative therapy has

7 In their translations of the passage, Bury (1933) uses "as best he can"; Mates (1996), "so far as he can"; and Annas and Barnes (2000), "as far as he can." As for dictionaries, Liddell and Scott (1996) give "as far as lies in one"; Bailly (1997), "autant qu'on peut"; and Adrados (2002–2010), "en la medida de lo posible."

worked on every occasion, and he cannot assure us that it will be efficacious in every, or even any, future patient afflicted by conceit and rashness. Sextus thus recognizes that the Pyrrhonist's arguments have failed, and will perhaps fail, to induce certain people to abandon their beliefs and suspend judgment; he does not even believe that there is always an argument that is capable of inducing suspension. Perhaps he observed that in some cases his arguments were able to reduce his patient's degree of belief in p , but not to the point of making his patient believe in p to degree 0.5 or close to 0.5, which is the degree corresponding to suspension of judgment. Neither does he discard the possibility that the arguments that have been capable of inducing suspension in his past patients may not be able to do the same in the case of his future patients. Hence, he will not restrict himself to utilizing the arguments that have proved to be efficacious, but will also use other arguments that have not had that effect (Machuca 2006, 132–3).⁸

Fifthly, what is the skeptic's criterion for distinguishing between weak and weighty therapeutic arguments? From what was argued below, the criterion is not the objective epistemic and logical features of those arguments. One possible candidate is the number of patients they are able to persuade: weak arguments are those that can persuade only a few patients, whereas weighty arguments are those that can persuade most or all patients (cf. Barnes 2000, xxviii; Powers 2010, 170 n. 19). How does this distinction fit in with that between different degrees of conceit and rashness? Given that Sextus tells us that weighty arguments are those capable of persuading the patients who are severely affected by conceit and rashness, whereas weak arguments are those capable of persuading the patients who are mildly affected by such conditions, we should conclude that the former arguments persuade a large number of patients, whereas the

⁸ Regarding the phrase κατὰ δύναμιν, it is worth considering two translations of the first sentence of *PH* III 280 that are different from the one given here. The Greek text is the following: 'Ο σκεπτικός διὰ τὸ φιλόανθρωπος εἶναι τὴν τῶν δογματικῶν οἴησίν τε καὶ προπέτειαν κατὰ δύναμιν ἰᾶσθαι λόγῳ βούλεται. Pellegrin (1997) renders it thus: "Le sceptique, du fait qu'il aime l'humanité, veut guérir par la puissance de l'argumentation la présomption et la précipitation des dogmatiques." Marchand (forthcoming) opts for the following translation: "Le sceptique, parce qu'il est philanthrope, veut guérir la présomption et la précipitation des dogmatiques par un argument déterminé en fonction de la puissance." Thus, whereas Pellegrin takes δύναμις to refer to the power or strength of the therapeutic argument employed by the Pyrrhonist, Marchand takes it to refer to the strength of the disease afflicting the patient that is to be matched by the strength of the therapeutic argument. Although in my view the Greek does not support either translation, both are compatible with the overall interpretation of the passage defended here. For even though neither reading of κατὰ δύναμιν refers to the Pyrrhonist's humility and caution, I take it that, on both readings, the Pyrrhonist's sole criterion in picking arguments to treat his patients is the persuasive power that, it appears to him, the arguments could have over them.

latter persuade only a small number of them. The problem with this conclusion is that it is possible that an argument capable of persuading highly conceited patients who have a strong tendency to make rash judgments might be unable to persuade those who are less arrogant and have a weaker tendency to make such judgments, and hence unable to persuade a large number of patients. In fact, at *PH* III 280–1 we find no claim that an argument capable of persuading a highly conceited patient who has a strong inclination to judge rashly is an argument capable of persuading many patients, nor that an argument capable of persuading a mildly conceited patient who is less inclined to judge rashly is an argument capable of persuading only a few of them.

Another possible candidate that has been suggested as the criterion for distinguishing between therapeutic arguments is the number of beliefs targeted by them (cf. Barnes 1990, 2691; Hankinson 1994, 68; Marchand forthcoming). In that case, the arguments that appear to be of mild persuasive power would be those that target only a restricted set of beliefs, whereas the arguments that appear to be of high persuasive power would be those that have a wider scope. This means that the patients who are mildly affected by conceit and rashness are those who can be cured by arguments that target only specific beliefs, whereas the patients who are severely affected by such conditions are those who can be cured by arguments that target most or all beliefs. The problem with this proposal is that it is possible both that a person might be badly affected by conceit and rashness with regard to a limited number of beliefs, and that another person might be slightly affected by such conditions with regard to a large number of beliefs. For instance, the first person might be affected by a high degree of conceit only vis-à-vis political beliefs, so that he makes many rash judgments mostly about politics, whereas the second person might be affected by a low degree of conceit not only vis-à-vis political beliefs, but also vis-à-vis religious, moral, and scientific beliefs, so that he makes a small number of rash judgments in several areas. In the former case, the skeptical doctor would probably first deploy from among his battery of arguments all those that call into question political beliefs and see whether they are persuasive enough to counterbalance the patient's beliefs; and only if they were not, he would appeal to far-reaching arguments. In the latter case, he would probably first use a few wide-ranging arguments in order to dislodge the various kinds of beliefs in question; and only in the event he failed, would he avail himself of different sets of arguments, each targeting a specific area. If in the former case the narrow arguments were efficacious, they would be regarded as weighty according to the distinction of *PH* III 280–1 inasmuch as they would cure the high degree of conceit and rashness that afflict the patient, but they would be regarded as weak according to the distinction under consideration inasmuch as they would be

arguments whose scope would be circumscribed to beliefs about a specific topic. If in the latter case the wide-ranging arguments were efficacious, they would be considered weak according to the distinction of *PH* III 280–1 inasmuch they would cure a patient who is mildly affected by conceit and rashness, but they would be considered weighty according to distinction under consideration inasmuch as they would be arguments targeting beliefs about various topics. Thus, the second candidate that has been suggested as the criterion for distinguishing between therapeutic arguments does not fit in with the distinction presented at *PH* III 280–1 either.

What is then the touchstone for discriminating between weak and weighty therapeutic arguments? The only touchstone mentioned in the final chapter of *PH* is the severity of the intellectual diseases the arguments are able to cure. The taxonomy of therapeutic arguments is therefore based on a description of their curative force: the Pyrrhonian doctor observes that there is a difference between them regarding their efficacy in curing the various degrees of conceit and rashness that afflict his dogmatic patients. He notices both that the dogmatic patients who are highly conceited and have a strong tendency to make rash judgments are hard to persuade, so that the arguments capable of persuading them strike him as strong in their persuasiveness, and that the patients who are less conceited and who are more cautious when making judgments are more easily persuaded, so that the arguments capable of persuading this latter group of patients but not the former strike him as weak in their persuasiveness. The Pyrrhonian therapist does not attempt to explain why his arguments have these different therapeutic effects, but limits himself to observing and reporting that they do. When he treats a new patient who is mildly conceited and is not much inclined to make rash judgments, he employs some of the arguments that have so far proved capable of persuading that kind of patient; and when he treats a new patient who is severely affected by conceit and has a strong tendency to make rash judgments, he avails himself of the arguments that have so far proved capable of persuading that type of patient. When administering the argumentative drugs in those ways, the Pyrrhonian doctor does not affirm that what worked in the past will work in the future, but merely follows the way things appear to him, which is his criterion of action (*PH* I 21–4).

Sixthly, I remarked above that, in order for an argument to be therapeutically efficacious, i.e., to succeed in persuading a given dogmatic patient, it must be deemed to be epistemically persuasive by him. More precisely, the therapeutic argument must strike the patient as being as epistemically persuasive as the opposite argument he himself puts forward, since it is this state of equipollence that, to all appearances, will make it possible for him to suspend judgment and

then to attain the state of undisturbedness (ἀταραξία).⁹ This does not mean, however, that the distinction between weighty and weak arguments at *PH* III 280–1 is a distinction between arguments that differ in their epistemic persuasiveness. Rather, a therapeutic argument is regarded by the Pyrrhonian doctor as weighty or weak in its persuasiveness depending on whether the patient persuaded by the argument is highly or mildly conceited, respectively: a weighty therapeutic argument is one that strikes a highly conceited patient as being as epistemically persuasive as the opposite argument he advances, whereas a weak therapeutic argument is one that strikes a mildly conceited patient as being so. The distinction between two types of arguments is not epistemic, but therapeutic. Note also that, given that epistemically rival arguments appear to the Pyrrhonist to be equipollent, but therapeutically some may appear to him to be stronger than others, at *PH* III 280–1 Sextus does not contradict what he says elsewhere about conflicting arguments appearing equally persuasive or credible to the Pyrrhonist himself (e.g., *PH* I 8, 10, 190, 196, 203, II 79).

Truth-Directed Inquiry

Sextus opens *PH* by distinguishing between three main kinds of philosophy according to the attitude their proponents take towards the object of a philosophical investigation: the dogmatic, the Academic, and the skeptical. Whereas dogmatists in the proper sense of the term affirm that they have discovered the truth, and Carneades, Clitomachus, and other Academics maintain that it cannot be apprehended, skeptics continue to investigate (*PH* I 1–4). Elsewhere, Sextus remarks that skeptics can consistently go on investigating because they agree that they do not know how things are in their nature and the purpose of their investigation is precisely to discover the answer they have not found yet, whereas for the dogmatists, who claim to know the nature of things, the investigation has come to an end (*PH* II 11, cf. *AD* II [= *AM* VIII] 321). As most readers already know, the Greek terms one translates as ‘skeptical’ and ‘skepticalism’, namely σκεπτικός and σκέψις, mean ‘inquirer’ and ‘inquiry’, respectively. The importance the skeptic attaches to the activity of inquiry is also seen in the fact that, when presenting the appellations of the skeptical outlook at *PH* I 7, Sextus points out that it “is called ‘investigative’ because of its activity concerning investigation and inquiry, and ‘suspensive’ because of the affection that

⁹ Whenever I refer to undisturbedness *tout court*, I have in mind specifically undisturbedness in matters of opinion.

comes about in the inquirer after the investigation (καλεῖται μὲν καὶ ζητητικὴ ἀπὸ ἐνεργείας τῆς κατὰ τὸ ζητεῖν καὶ σκέπτεσθαι, καὶ ἔφεκτικὴ ἀπὸ τοῦ μετὰ τὴν ζήτησιν περὶ τὸν σκεπτόμενον γινομένου πάθους)". The Pyrrhonist is engaged in ongoing truth-directed inquiry because he is willing to open-mindedly consider new arguments and doctrines advanced by his rivals or old ones that are presented to him in a different light. After each and every inquiry he has so far undertaken, the Pyrrhonist has suspended judgment, but this should not be understood as something that happens once and for all. For this reason, it is a mistake to characterize skeptical investigation as endless, infinite, or lifelong, and the Pyrrhonist as a perpetual inquirer, as scholars often do.¹⁰ Such a characterization ultimately implies that the Pyrrhonist believes that the quest for truth is doomed to failure because the answers to the questions under investigation cannot be discovered or apprehended, a belief that would liken his stance to the one that Sextus ascribes to certain Academics. It could be objected that if the Pyrrhonist's investigation is ongoing, with no end in sight, he cannot be a negative dogmatist inasmuch as a negative dogmatist would not bother to engage in inquiry in the first place.¹¹ In response, it should first be noted that if the Pyrrhonist keeps on inquiring because he leaves open the possibility of finding the truth and not because he wants to keep constructing equipollent conflicts that would make it possible for him to maintain his suspension and undisturbedness,¹² then it would make no sense for him to remain engaged in that activity if he thought that it has no end or is infinite. It may be argued that Academics (at least as depicted by Sextus) are no longer engaged in the inquiry into truth precisely because they believe that it is endless and hence that, if they remained engaged in that activity, they would become perpetual inquirers. Since taking part in such a futile epistemic activity would make no sense, they decided to stop investigating. If the Pyrrhonist kept engaged in an inquiry into *x* that in his view has no end inasmuch as the truth about *x* cannot

10 See, e.g., Cavini (1981, 540), Sedley (1983, 22), Annas and Barnes (1985, 1), Tarrant (1985, 26), Hankinson (1998, 14, 29, 300), Harte and Lane (1999, 158, 171), Barnes (2000, xxi; 2007, 327–8), Spinelli (2005a, 117; 2005b, 150), and Grgić (2006, 142–4, 156).

11 This objection was raised by an anonymous reviewer.

12 Several interpreters have maintained that the Pyrrhonist's investigation does not consist in the search for truth, but in the examination of dogmatic claims and arguments in order to construct conflicts between positions of equal force that would make it possible to maintain the states of suspension and undisturbedness. See Hiley (1987, 189–93), Palmer (2000, 355, 367–9), Striker (2001, 118), Grgić (2006, 143, 153, 156), Thorsrud (2009, 131, 135–6, 161), Bett (2010, 188–9), and Marchand (2010, 134–9); see also Hankinson (1998, 29, 300) and Castagnoli (2018, 222–5). For the view that the Pyrrhonist's inquiry is truth-directed, see Perin (2010, ch. 1) and Machuca (2011b, 251–3; 2013, 204–14; 2015b, 179–86).

be found either because it is undiscoverable by nature or because inquirers are incapable of discovering it, he would be an unreasonable negative dogmatist: he would continue to take part in an activity he knows to be pointless.

Sextus's description of the Pyrrhonist as being engaged in truth-directed inquiry has been called into question as incorrect, disingenuous, or illegitimate. It has been objected that truth-directed inquiry and skepticism are incompatible or that there is a gap between the theory and the practice of skepticism, and hence that Sextus is wrong in claiming that the skeptic continues to search for truth or that skepticism is a kind of philosophy. I have elsewhere examined these objections and argued that Sextus can successfully reply to them (Machuca 2011b, 251–3). Here I would like to focus on the question of whether truth-directed inquiry is compatible with the dialectical and therapeutic uses of arguments analyzed in the previous section.

It might be argued that with the dialectical use of arguments the Pyrrhonist only intends to refute his rivals in the sense of showing them that, according to their own epistemic and logical standards, their positions are ultimately untenable; and that with the therapeutic use of arguments he only intends to cure his rivals of those states that strike him as intellectual diseases by means of dialectical arguments. In neither case is the use of arguments truth-directed: the Pyrrhonist does not avail himself of arguments as a means of discovering the truth about the matters he investigates. In the case of the dialectical use of arguments, the reason why he seeks to refute his rivals is not of course that he has grasped a truth different from that which his rivals claim to have discovered. But neither is he trying to find out whether any one of his rivals' doctrines is epistemically strong enough to withstand the attacks mounted using competing doctrines. Rather, he employs every argument at his disposal, and any logical principle, justificatory standard, or inference rule endorsed by his rivals, with the sole purpose of creating equipollence between conflicting arguments, thereby inducing suspension of judgment. As for the therapeutic use of arguments, it seems to show that every use of an argument made by the Pyrrhonist is wholly pragmatic, without regard for whether any of the arguments he utilizes would make it possible to discover the truth about the topics on which the arguments bear. What matters is whether dialectical arguments are therapeutically efficacious, not whether they are sound or unsound. Now, if one takes Sextus at his word and hence does not think that he is disingenuous in his depiction of the Pyrrhonist's inquiry, then one should make a serious attempt to show that the dialectical and therapeutic uses of arguments are not incompatible with their use in open-minded and truth-directed inquiry, or at least that the tension between those uses is not as severe as interpreters think.

With regard to the dialectical use of arguments, it should be noted that the fact that the Pyrrhonist constructs counterbalancing arguments using premises and inference rules to which he is not doxastically committed does not entail that he does not carefully and open-mindedly assess the soundness of the arguments on both sides of the issue. Given that the dogmatists claim to have discovered the correct answers to a considerable number of questions, the Pyrrhonist tests the epistemic credentials of those answers using all the tools at his disposal, including the concepts, assertions, logical principles, rules of inference, criteria of justification, and arguments accepted by those who claim to know (or to hold epistemically justified beliefs) or who present themselves as experts. If the dogmatists' positions were as strong as they are said to be, then it may be assumed that they should withstand the Pyrrhonist's dialectical arguments. Some might reply that his sole interest is to create an argumentative situation in which rival arguments bearing on a given issue strike his opponents as equally credible so as to induce them to suspend judgment. But this reply just takes for granted in a question-begging way that the Pyrrhonist cannot engage in truth-directed inquiry, and what I am trying to do here is precisely to show that the dialectical use of arguments is not *per se* incompatible with the ongoing inquiry into truth that Sextus explicitly ascribes to the Pyrrhonist. It should be borne in mind that the Pyrrhonist can carry out his open-minded and truth-directed investigations either through personal reflection or by engaging in debate with the dogmatists. This interpretation seems to find support in the following passage:

The general character of the skeptical ability has been shown with the appropriate discussion, outlined in part directly and in part by distinguishing it from its neighboring philosophies. What remains to be done next is to explain also its application to the particulars so as not to proceed with reckless rashness either when inquiring into things on our own or when resisting the dogmatists (εἰς τὸ μῆτε ἰδίᾳ περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων σκεπτομένουσ μῆτε τοῖσ δογματικοῖσ ἀνταίρωντασ ῥαδίωσ προπίπτειν). (AD I 1 [= AM VII 1])

I interpret the second part of this passage as indicating that the Pyrrhonist can pursue his inquiries in the two ways I distinguished above, and that this is the reason why Sextus remarks that he must avoid rashness both when inquiring on his own and when “rising up against” (ἀνταίρωντασ) the dogmatists. The reason he should not proceed with rashness in the latter case is that he should open-mindedly or in good faith assess the epistemic credentials of the arguments put forward by his dogmatic opponents in debate. Otherwise, he might take a given argument to be as equally persuasive or credible as its rival arguments when in fact the former is to be preferred to the latter. Someone might object that in the quoted passage Sextus in fact distinguishes between the skeptic's inquiries and

his attacks on the dogmatists' views, which shows that they are incompatible activities. Note, first, that even if they were two different activities, they would not thereby be incompatible: distinct activities may well be complementary. Secondly, it seems to me that, by pointing out that the skeptic may inquire into things *by himself* or *on his own* (*ἰδίῳ*), Sextus is indicating that the skeptic may also inquire into things by entering into debate with the dogmatists: resisting or opposing the dogmatists means not to accept their claims uncritically but to subject them to careful and unbiased scrutiny by using dialectical arguments.

Before considering whether the therapeutic and investigative uses of arguments are compatible, I would like to briefly examine the way in which the Pyrrhonist inquires into things on his own by means of arguments that are not dialectical inasmuch as they are not used against a real or imaginary opponent. It is plain that he may construct arguments on the basis of the way things appear to him, namely, by employing propositions, logical principles, rules of inference, and criteria of justification that impose on him or that strike him as psychologically (not epistemically) persuasive.¹³ Let me explain. To begin with, Sextus explicitly recognizes that the Pyrrhonist experiences himself as capable of thinking (*PH* I 24), which can reasonably be interpreted in the sense that he experiences himself both as equipped with what we call cognitive capacities and as hardwired to think and respond in specific ways. It may be argued that, given his psychological constitution, the Pyrrhonist's thinking proceeds in accordance with certain logical principles and inference rules, and perhaps even in accordance with certain justificatory criteria. Secondly, the Pyrrhonist was brought up and educated in a given familial and socio-cultural context; he has had certain life experiences; he received instruction in a given discipline or profession, such as philosophy, medicine, or astronomy; and he lives in a particular community. It is clear that all such factors have exerted, and continue to exert, a strong influence in his thinking, shaping the way he regards certain issues and inculcating in him certain criteria of justification and forms of argumentation. Now, even though the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment about the truth of logical principles such as the principle of non-contradiction, the correctness of inference rules such as *modus ponens*, the adequacy of criteria of justification such as those underpinning the so-called Five Modes of Agrippa, and the truth of moral, political, religious, metaphysical, or scientific judgments, his suspension neither affects the way he is psychologically hardwired nor entirely removes the influence of the above circumstantial factors, which shape the various ways things

¹³ On the difference between epistemic and psychological persuasiveness in Sextus, see Machuca (2009; 2017).

appear to him. Thirdly, if the Pyrrhonist wants to keep engaging in any kind of investigation, in any type conversation, in any sort of human activity, then he cannot but use the capacities with which he finds himself equipped and follow non-doxastically the way he is intellectually appeared to. Since he does not believe that those capacities are unreliable or that his appearances are false, he cannot discard the possibility that they might allow him to discover the truth about various issues and hence he cannot find any reason to stop his inquiries. To see the three preceding points more clearly, let us consider the Agrippan modes (*PH* I 164–77). Interpreters often rightly point out that the Pyrrhonist is not doxastically committed to the conception of epistemic justification underlying the Agrippan modes. Rather, these modes are parasitic on the dogmatists' own theories of epistemic justification, so that they are essentially *ad hominem* arguments. However, I think this is not all that can be said about the Pyrrhonist's use of the Five Modes, since it may also be argued that there is a way in which he assents to them. One may suppose that his philosophical and socio-cultural milieu has influenced him in such a way that the conception of epistemic justification at work in those modes still exerts some kind of psychological influence on him, so that he spontaneously finds unacceptable a piece of reasoning that is circular or a chain of justification that does not come to an end or a claim made arbitrarily without any support. Of course, this kind of assent is not to be interpreted as doxastic, but as a part of the Pyrrhonist's natural capacity to think and, hence, as a part of his general psychological or non-doxastic assent or yielding to appearances. Thus, the Pyrrhonist makes a dialectical use of the Agrippan modes, but he may also be psychologically influenced by them on account of both the way he is hardwired and his philosophical and socio-cultural context. Neither aspect is incompatible with the use of the Five Modes in open-minded and truth-directed inquiry: the Pyrrhonist avails himself of those modes to see whether he encounters a position that is epistemically stronger or more credible than its rivals or whether he is forced to maintain his suspension because the competing positions strike him as being equipollent. The Pyrrhonist's exercise of his natural capability of thinking includes, in my view, both the consideration and the production of arguments to which he is not doxastically committed and of which he avails himself in his inquiries (both philosophical and mundane) when investigating on his own or when engaging the dogmatists in debate.¹⁴

¹⁴ I have elsewhere defended in more detail the interpretation of the Pyrrhonist's extensive and non-committed use of reason expounded in this paragraph: see Machuca (2009, 116–23; 2011a, sects. 4 and 5; 2013, sect. 4; 2015a, sect. III; 2018, sect. IV).

As regards the therapeutic use of arguments, it has recently been claimed that it is at variance with truth-directed inquiry. Casey Perin has maintained that it has little to do with the central features of Pyrrhonism as described in *PH*, being incompatible particularly with the Pyrrhonist's search for truth. For the Pyrrhonist who is a therapist is not concerned with the epistemic but with the pragmatic value of an argument, given that he is not concerned with whether it "establishes the truth of its conclusion and, by doing so, resolves a conflict between candidates for belief" (2010, 121). Along the same lines, Stéphane Marchand (forthcoming) has claimed that the sole aim of the Pyrrhonist's argumentation "n'est pas la découverte de la vérité, ni la production d'une conviction, mais l'efficacité. Le régime d'argumentation du sceptique est donc pragmatique, il s'agit de choisir des arguments efficaces."¹⁵ Unlike these interpreters, I think that the therapeutic and investigative uses of arguments are for the most part compatible.

I should first of all remark that I have elsewhere argued that the philanthropy that motivates the Pyrrhonist's argumentative therapy is not essential to his stance and that it must be explained by the influence of circumstantial factors such as the type of upbringing he received, the laws and customs of the community in which he has lived, and the connection there was in antiquity between philosophy, medicine, and philanthropy (Machuca 2006, 131–2, 134–6). Neither do I think that his therapeutic use of arguments, no matter what motivation it might have (philanthropic or not), is an intrinsic aspect of his stance (cf. Machuca 2013, 222). It is also true that *PH* III 280–1 is the only passage of Sextus's surviving writings that refers to the Pyrrhonist's argumentative therapy, and in this respect it can be viewed as some sort of anomaly. But it must be stressed that none of these points implies that the therapeutic use of arguments is manifestly at variance with the Pyrrhonian outlook. For one, we saw that it fits well with the Pyrrhonist's dialectical style of argumentation.

Note that, in case a given Pyrrhonist undertakes the therapeutic argumentative practice, there is no obvious reason for thinking that this might interfere with his truth-directed investigation. In his inquiries, the Pyrrhonist is concerned with the epistemic credentials of the arguments advanced by the dogmatists and of those he himself comes up with. But if, given his personality, he happens to

¹⁵ It is also worth noting that Bett (2011, 15 with n. 21) maintains that *PH* III 280–1 is "an anomaly" and talks about "the incongruity between this passage and the rest of the work." The anomaly or the incongruity is supposed to be that Sextus's interest in converting other people to skepticism is incompatible with his search for undisturbedness. For reasons he does not specify, Mates (1996, 314) goes so far as to claim that Sextus is not the author of the passage (see Machuca 2009, 109).

care about other people's well-being and if it appears to him both that having certain attitudes or dispositions brings about suffering and that arguments may have a healing effect on those people, then he may decide to make a pragmatic, therapeutic use of arguments. To take a common and partly similar case: sometimes people who are interested in the truth about certain questions, and hence in discovering or constructing sound arguments no matter where these may lead them, are reluctant, for wholly pragmatic reasons, to expose others to those arguments. For example, a person may be unwilling to share the conclusions of what he regards as sound arguments with a child, a depressed friend, or an unstable patient for fear that becoming aware of the truths expressed in those conclusions may have a negative psychological effect on them. The therapeutic use of arguments can be taken to be incompatible with open-minded and truth-directed inquiry on condition that one takes Sextus to claim that it is the *only* use that the Pyrrhonist makes of arguments, that is, that the Pyrrhonist's *sole* purpose in employing arguments is to cure dogmatists of their conceit and rashness. In that case, the Pyrrhonist would not care at all about whether the arguments he utilizes to persuade his dogmatic patients are sound and hence about whether they make it possible to discover the truth about the issues on which they bear. But Sextus does talk at *PH* I 2–3 and *PH* II 11 of finding the truth or the answers concerning the objects of the Pyrrhonist's inquiries.

Curing the dogmatists of their conceit and rashness does not seem to contribute at all to the search for truth, because in the context of the argumentative therapy Sextus is only worried about the dogmatists' intellectual well-being. However, one may conjecture that the states of conceit and rashness represent an obstacle to the quest for truth because they hinder careful and impartial inquiry, and that, insofar as open-minded and truth-directed inquiry is a collective endeavor, as few people as possible should be afflicted by those states. Hence, even if the therapeutic use of arguments, as described in the final chapter of *PH*, is entirely focused on the dogmatic patients' intellectual well-being, not only is it not incompatible with the investigative use of arguments, but the former could in principle contribute to the latter. However, even if that were the case, it should be noted that, insofar as the skeptic exhibits a sincere regard for the dogmatists' mental well-being, his interest in discovering the truth about the issues that are the object of his inquiries could not be the only reason why he carries out his argumentative therapy. As we saw, Sextus mentions the Pyrrhonist's philanthropic concern for those who appear to him to be afflicted by certain intellectual diseases. To sum up: (i) the therapeutic and investigative uses of arguments may be wholly independent activities, which nonetheless does not mean that they are incompatible, and (ii) even though in the case of the Pyrrhonist's described by Sextus the therapeutic use of arguments happens to be

motivated by the philanthropic attitude he adopts owing to the influence of circumstantial factors, (iii) his engagement in ongoing inquiry into truth could in principle be a reason to make a therapeutic use of arguments as a means that would contribute to better conduct such an inquiry.

It could be objected that I have overlooked what is the most important piece of evidence in support of the view that the therapeutic and investigative uses of arguments are incompatible, namely, what Perin (2010, 13) calls “the value argument”: if one believes that something is good, one will be disturbed if one lacks it, and otherwise disturbed by the prospect of losing it; and if one believes that something is bad, one will be disturbed if one has it, and otherwise disturbed by the prospect of getting it (*PH* I 27–8, III 237–8). This argument seems to imply that if someone were to discover the truth regarding some evaluative matter x , he should not believe that truth about x insofar as he wishes to retain the state of undisturbedness. It thus appears that the aim of discovering the truth is incompatible with the aim of achieving and maintaining undisturbedness.¹⁶

The first point to note is that the value argument is not of course to be understood as an argument to which the Pyrrhonist is doxastically committed, i.e., as an argument he believes to be sound. Rather, it is to be understood as a dialectical argument when it is used in debate with the dogmatists, and as a report of the way things appear to the Pyrrhonist when he is describing his own experience and is not engaging with the dogmatists.

Secondly, it is important to observe that, in order to relate the value argument to the therapeutic use of arguments, one needs to assume that the conceit and rashness that afflict the dogmatic patients render them undisturbed in the Pyrrhonian therapist’s eyes, and hence that with his argumentative therapy he seeks to help them to attain and maintain the state of undisturbedness. One would also need to assume that, if at any point the Pyrrhonist came to discover the truth about a matter he is investigating, he would want to share the discovery with his patients, who would then start holding one or more true beliefs that would threaten their mental tranquility. Only with these two assumptions in place would the investigative use of arguments be *prima facie* incompatible with the therapeutic use of them.

Thirdly, the two uses of arguments in question would conflict if the inquiry resulted in a belief about what the truth is concerning an evaluative matter or if one believed that discovering the truth about any matter is itself of value.¹⁷

¹⁶ This objection was raised by an anonymous reviewer.

¹⁷ I think that two of the sources of disturbance that Sextus identifies (holding beliefs in general and holding value beliefs in particular) are actually related: holding any kind of belief (understanding belief in p as taking p to be true) is a source of disturbance only insofar as one

Hence, if after carrying out an inquiry the Pyrrhonist discovered the truth about a non-evaluative matter, thereby acquiring a belief about what the truth regarding that matter is, he would of course stop being a Pyrrhonist,¹⁸ but he would not lose his undisturbedness unless he acquired the additional belief that believing the truth in question is of objective value.

Fourthly, let us suppose that undisturbedness is lost if the Pyrrhonist acquires one or more true value beliefs: how would the dogmatist he has now become react? If he believed, or if it continued to appear to him, that undisturbedness is a state worth attaining, then he would have to choose between his epistemic and pragmatic goals. Either he would accept that he is looking for a pragmatic goal that he cannot attain because he has come to know the truth about the value of x on the basis of compelling evidence bearing on x , or he would privilege his pragmatic goal and try not to believe the truth in question regardless of the available evidence. He would have to decide which goal has priority over the other.

I think that something similar may happen to the full-blown Pyrrhonist. He keeps on investigating x both because of his suspensive attitude and because of his inquisitive temperament. Suspension leaves open both the possibility of there being a truth about x and the possibility of finding out what that truth is. But the Pyrrhonist may decide not to inquiry into x any further. So his decision to keep on inquiring is to be explained by an inquisitive temperament shaped by such factors as the way he was brought up and educated, the society in which he has lived, and his training as a philosopher. It seems unreasonable for the Pyrrhonist to engage in an epistemic activity if he wishes to maintain undisturbedness precisely because it appears to him that certain possible results of that activity run counter to the maintenance of that state. Thus, here too there seems to be a tension between epistemic and pragmatic goals. But note that insofar as the Pyrrhonist is merely reporting an appearance when referring to the obstacle to the attainment and maintenance of undisturbedness and insofar as he suspends judgment, he cannot rule out the possibility that things would not happen the way it appears to him they would happen. That is, it could be the case that, even if the Pyrrhonist discovered the truth about an evaluative matter or even if he discovered the truth about a non-evaluative matter and acquired the belief that knowing such a truth is of objective value, undisturbedness would not be lost. Even if it now appears to him that holding value beliefs is

holds the second-order belief that believing what is true is of objective value (cf. Machuca, 2011b, 253; 2013, 209).

¹⁸ As Sextus remarks in the course of his discussion of whether Plato can be deemed a skeptic, the person who holds even one single belief is a dogmatist (*PH* I 223).

an obstacle to attaining and maintaining undisturbedness, this might turn out not to be the case if the Pyrrhonist succeeded in discovering what is objectively the case about a given evaluative matter. He cannot discard that possibility because it also appears to him that up to this point he has never found the truth, and so he cannot be certain about what would occur in that situation.

There thus seems to be a tension between the Pyrrhonist's therapeutic or pragmatic use of arguments and the investigative or epistemic use of them when it comes to evaluative matters. But the tension may be lessened when one realizes that the therapeutic use of arguments can contribute to truth-directed inquiry when this is conceived of as a collective endeavor, and particularly when one keeps in mind that the Pyrrhonist proceeds on the basis of his appearances and does not (because he cannot) rule out the possibility that finding the truth about evaluative matters may, contrary to appearances, make it possible to attain and maintain the state of undisturbedness.

Concluding Remarks

In addition to an oppositional use of arguments, the Pyrrhonist makes a therapeutic, a dialectical, and an investigative use of them. The dialectical use is clearly related to the therapeutic use inasmuch as, in his argumentative therapy, the Pyrrhonist employs arguments to which he is not himself doxastically committed but that his dogmatic patients must regard as being as epistemically persuasive as the rival arguments they put forward. The dialectical use of arguments is also related to the investigative use of them inasmuch as, to test the epistemic credentials of the views he open-mindedly examines in his debate with the dogmatists, the Pyrrhonist avails himself of arguments he does not accept *in propria persona*. It is more complicated to find a connection between the therapeutic and investigative uses of arguments. They are two uses that have different motivations. Because of his philanthropic attitude, the Pyrrhonist is concerned about the mental well-being of his dogmatic rivals, and because of his suspensive attitude and his inquisitive temperament, he keeps on open-mindedly inquiring into the truth regarding a wide range of issues. So far, there is no tension whatsoever between the two uses. But when one relates the therapeutic use of arguments to the attainment and maintenance of undisturbedness and takes into account that it appears to the Pyrrhonist that holding value beliefs is an obstacle to attaining and maintaining that state of mind, then it seems that the Pyrrhonian therapist can coherently engage in ongoing inquiry provided that, in the event he discovered the truth about *x*, he would not reveal

such a truth to his dogmatic patients. However, first, this would be a problem only if the inquiry resulted in a true first-order belief about an evaluative matter or in the true second-order belief that discovering the truth about any matter is of objective value. And secondly, given his suspension of judgment, the Pyrrhonist does not rule out the possibility that obtaining either of those results might make it possible to attain and maintain the state of undisturbedness.

Let me conclude by noting that I do not claim that in Sextus's writings we find explicit remarks that support all the interpretive points made in this article. I do think, though, that the interpretation defended here makes sense of the therapeutic, dialectical, and investigative aspects of the Pyrrhonist's argumentative practice. The interpreters who have called into question one of those aspects proceed in the same way: at certain points, they go beyond what is explicitly said by Sextus in an attempt to assess the coherence of his presentation of Pyrrhonism. Doing so is perfectly legitimate when one is concerned not only with the history of Pyrrhonism or the exegesis of the relevant sources, but also with a systematic understanding of Pyrrhonism as a kind of philosophy.

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